

## Life, Liberty... and the pursuit of American Culture

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(NOTE: It has been said that: “to teach a language, you must first teach the culture,” and certainly that is applicable to the translator working with an American English text, although as one English native waggishly (and rather snobbishly) commented, to speak of an American “culture,” was—to her—to create an oxymoron, that complexing combination of contradictory or incongruous words, such as “civil war”, “military solution” or even “computer art”, so beloved to British humor. Yet, as the French have illustrated lately with their ban against the so-called “cultural imperialism” of American English in their language and culture, it is obvious that an American “culture” not only *does* exist, but is making its impact felt all over the globe. For these reasons, among others, it is worth examining the roots, contemporary setting and implications of this culture for the future, if for nothing else but to help clarify the concept of “American Culture” for any foreign translator working from a source text by an American author.)

It all began only 223 years ago in the city of Philadelphia, when representatives from England’s thirteen colonies in the “New World” met to find a solution to what was deemed to be England’s odious system of laws and taxes which hampered the economic growth of the colonies. (“Taxation without representation!” was the American Revolution’s battle cry.)

In that hot summer of 1776, 55 men who were to become known as “America’s Forefathers” drafted an extraordinary document: the first Constitution in the history of the world. The concept of a written instrument embodying the basic principles and laws of a nation that guarantees certain rights to the people in it was unknown before that date in any country on the globe.

But perhaps more interesting were the concepts set forth in the U.S. Constitution: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men were created

equal and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among these life, liberty *and the pursuit of happiness.*”

The idea of a nation calling “the pursuit of happiness” a right is still astounding today, and has had a remarkable impact on the American people and their culture.

In 1776, the newly formed United States of America was simply an incorporation of those 13 states bordering the Atlantic Ocean: Maine, New Hampshire, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New York, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North and South Carolina, Georgia and Tennessee. Florida, now the land of “Disneyworld” and “Miami Vice,” was then in the hands of the Spanish, as were the Southwest and Western portions of the country, and were acquired by the U.S.A. only in the following century. The Mid-Eastern states were actually *bought* from the French, with the Louisiana Purchase, in the early years of the 19th century.

Other parts of the country, such as the vast plains states, were wrestled away from the indigenous peoples, known as the “Red Indians” through a series of bloody and vicious territorial wars, which virtually wiped out entire tribes which had occupied the land for centuries. Alaska was bought from the Russian czars, (and known at the time as “Seward’s Folly” after the member of President Abraham Lincoln’s cabinet who championed its purchase), and Hawaii was annexed as recently as 1959, becoming, at this point, the last of the 50 states that now, in 1994, make up the United States of America.

Thus, we can see that the clichéd phrase “the great melting pot” does actually apply to this incredibly large and diverse compilation of races, national and ethnic origins and religions as people from all over the world came to the U.S.... aggressive people, unhappy people, unwanted—or even criminals—in their native lands, families escaping famine or religious persecution, dreamers and schemers.

Waves of immigrants arrived and settled various parts of the country, 35 million of them between 1776 and 1920: the early English and Dutch, the Irish and the Italians in the Northeast; the Hispanics in the Southwest and West; the Chinese, many of whom were “Shanghai-ed”, i.e., kidnapped from China, to work as laborers on the Western railroad in the late 1800’s; Blacks taken as slaves from their villages in Africa to work in the cotton fields of the South and later as free men and women in the factories of the Industrial North; Scandanavians in the Mid-West, carving out enormous farming lands for grain and livestock; the Jews of Europe fleeing the Holocaust, bringing a cultural heritage of 5,000 years, to settle all over the country.

The flood continued as the Vietnamese refugees arrived in the 1970’s and 80’s, and even now the Mexicans and other Central Americans swim the Rio Grande, daring the border guards’ dogs and the desert’s heat; the Capitalists from Hong Kong escape before the threat of a Communist economic system;

and the desperate plights of the Haitian and Cuban rafters fill today's headlines, all drawn by the promises of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness".

But how does this dream *really* manifest itself in the everyday life of the United States? In a Capitalist system, defining itself in its goals.

Harold Broadkey, a writer for *The New Yorker* says:

The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution and the Bill of Rights are strangely like ad texts, guarantees of the sort that you find in ads...the foundations of middle-classness in America have nothing to do with social class in the European sense and everything to do with a utopian attempt.

The American equivalent (which is hardly equivalent) of the landed gentry is a socially wobbly market of consumers who are rich and arrogant as all getout, easily intimidated and yet not easily restrained. Here, because the culture is so unsteady (and so new), it is the how-to element that dominates —how to be *happy* or reasonably comfortable. An American daydream, as in Twain (and Hemigway), is about re-building after the flood, about being better off than before, about outwitting this or that challenger, up to and including death.

Optimism. Hopefulness. Our American fondness for advertising and our dependence on it culturally to represent not what works or is worth perserving but what is worth our working for —this, in lieu of tradition, is nervously life-giving, a form of freedom. It is also a madness of sorts, a dream-taunted avidity for the future to replace a sense of history. But it is the basis of America— the forward-looking thing.<sup>1</sup>

But all this is history, or perhaps history in the making. Probably the most important influence on today's American culture are the so-called "Baby Boomers", that enormous demographic blip made up of the hundreds of thousands of children born in the United States from the end of World War II to the early 1960's. The post-War economy in the United States was in a terrific "boom" itself as millions of "G.I."s (the slang name for American soldiers in World War II, based on their "Government Issued" uniforms) returned home from the war, married, and settled down to suburban tranquility and had babies, lots and lots of babies.

As these babies grew up, their sheer numbers, in a country controlled almost by definition by a Capitalist point of view, meant that the culture was molded to meet their needs. When they were small, those businesses which catered to toddlers and children were "booming" as well. When they reached their 'teens, virtually the entire American culture turned to the needs, wants and desires of the "Boomers" and, in consequence, fashion, music, drama and film, art, the American philosophical outlook, everything that defines a culture mirrored the Youth Movement and its proclivities.

Hundreds of new words came into being at the behest of the "Boomers", even including their name itself, which is based not on the standard English

usage of the word “boom” for an explosive sound, but, in a typical American way, on the 1890’s “Boom towns” in the West, when gold was discovered in unprecedented amounts and people’s fortunes were made overnight by the glitter of gold dust in the bottom of a shallow tin pan.

In the 1960’s the “Boomers”’ influence was mainly limited to the cultural ranges of art, fashion and music; but as this generation’s males became 18 years old and eligible to be “drafted” into the U.S. Army and sent to fight in the “Vietnam Conflict” (as the Vietnam War was originally, euphemistically called) their interest became sharply political and “flower power” became a code word for the “Make love, not war!” generation, as “draft dodgers”, “hippies” and “freaks” achieved new meanings when applied to this generation’s members.

As Bill Bryson, author of *Made in America*, a recently published book studying the making of the “American” language, persuasively argues about understanding a nation’s history through its language: “Unless we understand the social context in which words are formed (...) we cannot begin to appreciate the richness and vitality of the words that made American speech.”<sup>2</sup>

Thus, into the 1980’s American culture continued to be molded by the “Boomers”. “Yuppies” became the name for this young, urbane, upwardly mobile group, having their first taste of the credit card euphoria which swept the United States during the decade and went on to influence, and ultimately almost destroy, the economies of both the United States and those of much of the world’s nations. Affluence, or the appearance of it, was the by-word of the Yuppies as “Beemers”, (BMW automobiles) and Toyota Camrys crowded out the older generation’s Lincolns and Cadillacs in companies’ executive parking spaces.

Now, in the 1990’s, the “Boomers” truly have come into power.

Supreme Court nominees are questioned about their use of marijuana when they were in University in the 1960’s and 70’s, and yet are selected to sit on the bench of the highest court in the country; the sitting President of the United States, Bill Clinton, who plays “rhythm and blues” on his saxophone, was featured by his (older) Republican opponents in the 1992 Presidential campaign in a famous photograph showing his active participation in an anti-Vietnam War rally where an American flag was burned —and he still won the election.

In the 1990’s, American culture has spread all over the world, 24 hours a day via Ted Turner’s Cable News Network, and the omni-present MTV, and Walt Disney’s “Aladin”, a *tour de force* of American culture as seen through the maniac eyes of Robin Williams, is released simultaneously in English in dozens of countries.

Also, now, there is the concept of “politically correct” language, the American movement to re-shape education, language, behavior and law to

reflect the country's multiculturalism and feminism, which has taken a grip on the "Boomers'" vocabulary, as the "Women's movement", its "Libbers", and the "Stonewall" gay movement have an economic impact on the culture.

Millions of the "Boomer" women have opted to have a career first and, perhaps, a marriage and family, later. And the Gay Liberation Movement, with its same sex couples adopting children and demanding their Constitutional rights in so many areas of American jurisprudence, has had a tremendous effect on the development of "politically correct" language.

(Unfortunately, in too many cases, with political correctness, the problems or offensive concepts being addressed do not change, only their *labels* do.)

"Political correctness", of course, has some basis of sensibility and sensitivity, but much of it has been carried to the absurd. For example, those people who are wheelchair bound for life, in former days were called "handicapped". Now, however, they are "physically challenged". The blind are "visually challenged", etc. Even the mentally retarded are now "mentally challenged" (to do *what?* comes the cynical reply). The "p.c.ers" even have approached the Bible, that long-suffering subject of language and fashion's translation whims, to make "The Lord's Prayer" begin "The One who lives in Heaven, blessed be Your name", and argue "why should a prayer end with *amen*, instead of *awomen?*"

(As an aside, there are some political correctness changes which were long overdue. *Policemen* have become police *officers*; firemen are now *firefighters*; a board meeting has a *chair* instead of a *chairman*, and so on, thus losing their sexual stereotypes.)

In general, political correctness has raised a good number of hackles, and not only in the United States.

"Intolerance, bigotry and pure stupidity", fumes French best-selling author Philippe Labro. "Minorities are not always right". Writer Françoise Goroud calls political correctness "intellectual terrorism" while for historian François Furet, political correctness' downplaying of European culture "relativizes all works of the mind and art and ruins the idea of the universality of truth".<sup>3</sup>

*Time* magazine comments that:

France's political correctness debate comes at a time of growing combativeness to protect French culture and identity. No matter that the French have adopted McDonald's and television's *Wheel of Fortune* as their own; Parliament last month passed a law that severely restricts the use of English in public life —or restaurant menus, television and billboards— unless translated into French.<sup>4</sup>

Now, English is the second most widely spoken language in the world, giving way only to Mandarin Chinese, which is generally spoken "only" by

that one fifth of humanity who live within the borders of the Republic of China, all 1,18 billion of them. Compare this to the fact that although English is the second language, there are *millions less* people living in those countries where English is the first spoken language.

Surely these numbers mean that there are millions of people, living in other, non-native speaking countries, who speak English as a second, or even third, language—a sure indication that the so-called “cultural imperialism” is a reality, given the logarithmically growing numbers of people using American English at work, or as they join the 25 million member internet system of computers, go to an American film, hum along with Billy Joel or Madonna on their car radio, or sit back for an evening of “Rosanne” and “Picket Fences” on television, all in English.

American English is a continually growing language, new words for new ideas and social changes appear virtually daily. According to Jonathan E. Lighter, a research associate in the English department of the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, “in the U.S. alone, thousands of vivid new words—from the rude to the crude to the lewd—have slipped into (some would say assaulted) the language. Most of the new vocabulary has come from discrete groups for whom a special jargon affords status and protection; students (*barf*), blacks (*jazz*, originally to copulate), the military (*blow it out your barracks bag*), alcohol users (*crooked*), drug users (*crackhead*) and the underworld (*grifter*).”<sup>5</sup>

It has even got to the point that one group will “hyjack” a word or phrase from one group for the second group’s uses. For example, the words “spin doctors” appeared in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s, used by the national press to describe those politicians, and “spokepersons” who would give what they considered the proper political “spin” (i.e., interpretation) to an edict from the White House or other politically powerful group.

Now, the “Grunge” musicians of “Generation X” have taken this phrase and “Spin Doctors” is the name of one of the generation’s hottest groups; and, to give it one more “spin”, the “Spin Doctors” were one of the new generation’s musicians to appear with “Boomer” rock and roll stars, such as Joe Cocker, at the 25th anniversary concert of Woodstock. (“What goes around, comes around” was the old hippie saying.) And so it goes.

Now that the “Boomers” are in power, naturally another subculture must be born, in this case, the so-called “Generation X”, to add its words to the continually expanding American cultural message.

“Generation X” (after Douglas Coupland’s 1991 novel of the same name) designates “a large subculture of white middle-class kids born after the baby boom, who now, as they enter adulthood, feel cheated by history: the “Boomers” had all the fun, in the sixties, and then they took all the good jobs and basked in their media-fed sense of cultural superiority.” According to Terrence Rafferty of *The New Yorker* the members of “Generation X” are:

Just out of college, and they're not thrilled about their prospects: they've overeducated and underemployed, and, worse, their disillusionment isn't winning them any sympathy (much less practical help) from their elders —no one appears to know, or care, what they're going through.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, a new wave of distinctively American culture is making its way into the rest of the world. "Generation X" already has one major novel and a film, Ben Stiller's "Reality Bites", and perhaps a dozen rock groups, such as "Counting Crows", "4 Non Blondes" and the doomed "Nirvana", whose lead singer made the cover of *Time* magazine after his suicide last spring under the headline "Death of an idol", dedicated to the spread of its message of cultural doom and gloom, and, concurrently, American culture, around the globe.

And so we see, in the end, that the reality of an American culture must be admitted, even by the British, as a teenager in India tunes in "Counting Crows'" newest song on his walkman, or a stockbroker in Japan catches the "World Business Report" on CNN.

Finally, who knows? One day soon, we may even see those world famous Golden Arches of McDonalds gleaming in the night across the rainswept plaza of Tiananmen Square.

Because, for better or for worse, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States is now the leader of what former President George Bush called the "New World Order", and its cultural impact will be a force to be reckoned with —and wrestled— by foreign translators around the globe, as we all stagger, most closely linked culturally than ever before, into the Millenium, and beyond.

## NOTES

1. Harold Broadkey, «Dying: An Update» *The New Yorker*, February 7, 1994, p. 42.
2. Bill Bryson, *Made in America* (Seeker & Warburg) 1994, p. 287.
3. Margot Hornblower, "Politiquement Correct?" *Time*, June 13, 1994, p. 37.
4. *Ibidem*.
5. Jonathan E. Lighter, *Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang* (Random House) 1994, p. 810.
6. Terrence Rafferty, «Brand X» *The New Yorker* April 13, 1994, p. 77.